

What Secrets? And at What Price?

The Reagan Administration is mad, to the point of madness, about secrecy. It thinks the Federal Government is one big sieve, that important secrets are dribbling out and that a firm disciplinary hand is needed. So the Administration is preparing to lower the boom on thousands of Government employees. They'll be forced to sign new pledges not to disclose classified information and new agreements to clear speeches, books and articles with Federal censors. And for what?

The secrecy madness won't shut down rumor mills or plug leaks, especially those at the highest levels. But it will deprive Americans of much information that ought to circulate freely between the public and its servants. It will especially chill discussion of national security issues.

Formal censorship of the sort proposed has long applied to the Central Intelligence Agency. Even if one accepts the need for it in that sensitive agency, that does not justify what the Administration intends to do: extend similar censorship to other agencies.

Officials deemed trustworthy enough to deal with secrets are required to promise to clear virtually any speeches and writings dealing with their jobs. They would have to do so not only while in office, but also after leaving office — indefinitely.

What wrong prompts so rigorous a remedy? You'd think there had been a rash of cosmic secrets blown in indiscreet utterances. Not so. The State, Defense and Justice Departments can cite only two examples in five years of a disclosure of classified

information by a former employee. There is as yet no showing that either case caused major damage. One was in a little-noticed novel about sabotage on a nuclear cruiser, the other in a California newspaper article by a retired Navy captain.

Richard Willard, the Justice Department's architect of secrecy rules and contracts, says there probably are more such cases that the Government hasn't discovered. That's a little like saying there are more scandals than anyone knows about. If security breaches are so frequent or alarming, you'd think the watchmen would be able to remember a lot of them without prompting.

Mr. Willard says he has other, classified examples that he will exhibit to Congressional committees under strict security. If he must make his case that way, let him try — and before the Administration carries out this costly and far-reaching secrecy program.

For the whole proposal is not merely rigorous. It is costly. Beyond administrative cost, it would exact a terrible price in blighted public discourse.

How many knowledgeable commentators will withhold their opinions, or see them diluted and delayed past the time when they can contribute to the formulation of national policy? How much less secure will we be when the defense and intelligence establishment enjoys yet another layer of insulation from criticism?

A healthy democracy has to balance the need for secrecy and the need for open debate without Government putting its thumb on the scale.